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AUTHOR Burns, Marcelline; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This study focuses upon alcohol use by the American Indian population in Los Angeles. A random sample of 216 men and 302 women was interviewed. The first part of the interview considered life circumstances, while the second part assessed individual attitudes toward alcohol and measured drinking behaviors. Of the sample, 51% were moderate to heavy drinkers, and 20% were light or infrequent drinkers. Over 50% of the men and 20% of the women were heavy drinkers. The tendency is either to drink moderately-to heavily or else to abstain. These people are in greater poverty than any other ethnic group. Drinking is viewed as a social activity. The Indians recognize the magnitude of this problem, and claim that it must be handled in Indian ways. Solutions cannot be imposed from the outside. (JLL)

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THE URBAN AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALCOHOL ABUSE

Marcelline Burns, John Dailey, Herbert Moskowitz

Historical accounts indicate that Native Americans, from the time of their first encounter with European civilization, have had major problems stemming from the use of alcohol. At the present time alcohol continues to be a first-order problem in many Indian communities, and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has given top priority to assisting them in their efforts to reduce alcohol abuse.

A number of studies have focused on drinking practices of the reservation resident; only a few have looked at the urban Indian. This paper reports on a study in Los Angeles, an area which has the largest urban American Indian population (counted by the census as 25,000, estimated in 1973 by community leaders to be almost twice that number.)

During the years 1960-1970 the number of Indians in Los Angeles increased more than 200%, many of these people coming to the city as participants in Bureau of Indian Affairs programs. Despite this common pathway in migrating to the city and despite their shared designation as Indian, they actually are a highly heterogeneous people. About ninety tribal backgrounds are represented among the respondents, the largest numbers being Navaho, then Sioux, and then the five civilized tribes - Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, Seminole, and Chicksaw.

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For this study a random sample of United States Census block groups was drawn from those with 20 or more Indian residents. Respondents were located within this sample by canvassing door to door. However, these people tend to be highly mobile, and it was found that in many instances they no longer lived in the areas indicated by the census.

A second method was used to locate individuals who did not live in high density areas. Each person interviewed was asked for names and addresses of other Indians - to create an additional pool from which to sample.

A total of 518 interviews were obtained by 6 interviewers who were themselves Indian. Five of these people have graduate study or a graduate degree in social work, the sixth is employed in American Indian manpower development.

The first part of the hour-or-more interview queried respondents about general life circumstances. The second part assessed the individual's attitudes toward alcohol, and measured current and past quantity and frequency of drinking.

The latter information, from which emerges a dramatic picture of the role of alcohol in the urban Indian community requires perspective. It must be viewed in the context of the Indian's socio-economic status and in terms of Indian culture and tradition.

The 216 men and 302 women who were interviewed typically were not newcomers to the city. The median length of urban residence was found to be 12 years. Still, about 75% had been

born and reared on or near a reservation and had moved to Los Angeles as adults. This finding is important to an understanding of alcohol data.

Most of the respondents formerly had lived in a rural area or small town, for the most part among other Indians, and then had moved to a complex urban environment where they live mostly among non-Indians. Alcohol-use patterns, which were established in the rural Indians environment and which may have been at least marginally acceptable there, do not necessarily transfer successfully to the city. For example, public drinking with a group of friends is a characteristic drinking style, particularly among the men of certain tribes. It also, of course, is a practice which leads to considerable difficulty with Los Angeles police.

Most of those interviewed indicated that they left the reservation to seek job training and/or employment. Despite this motivation to work the unemployment rate was found to be three times the overall rate for Los Angeles County, and those who were employed were overrepresented in low pay, low status jobs. Not surprisingly, over 1/4 of the families were subsisting on incomes below poverty level. They occupy rental housing which is of the poorest quality. Many do not work during extended time periods.

The Indian interviewers were able in most instances to establish a situation of friendliness and confidence, and the rather lengthy interview led to spontaneous comments on their

lives and needs. Often they expressed a yearning for the Indian way, the life style with its mandate for sharing, for non-interference - a slower-paced life in close harmony with nature. Many try to maintain traditions; they visit the reservation as often as possible and participate in tribal affairs. In the city they try to keep certain customs alive; they attend Pow-wows, prepare traditional foods, give their children Indian names, and perhaps attempt to use and preserve the language. Generally and predictably, they distrust and dislike whites though there is considerable range of attitude in this area.

A rather striking expression of ambivalence came in responses to two separate questions. When asked where they would prefer to live, a majority said they would rather live somewhere other than Los Angeles but when asked whether they plan to leave the area, 73% said they have no such plans. Job availability ties them to the city, however reluctantly. About 16% say they plan to return home when their children are grown or when they retire.

These are people who lack many of the usual material advantages of urban dwellers. On almost every social and economic variable they seem to be worse off than any other ethnic group - housing, jobs, recreation, education, income - on all of these indices they are a low-ranked minority. Yet their view of life in the city is not as negative as might be expected in view of their circumstances. Apparently, they

fare better than would be possible on the reservation. Though they may be deeply concerned about the loss of family and tribal ties, for the most part they recognize that economic realities preclude leaving the city.

And how much do they drink? - a great deal comparatively. Drinking practices were quantified by the classification scheme of Cahalan, Cisin & Crossley from their national survey of drinking practices, and comparisons with the general population can be made.

51% of the Indian sample were moderate to heavy drinkers. The comparable figure for the general population was 25%. At the other end of the distribution 20% of the Indians were light or infrequent drinkers; this compares to 43% in the general population.

80% of the men drink at least once a month. Over half of the men are heavy drinkers. Only 8 said they were lifelong abstainers, but currently almost 20% abstain. Only 2% say they drink infrequently. It appears that they either are regular, moderate-to-heavy drinkers or they abstain. A little drinking is not the style. Women drink much less, but even so 20% are heavy drinkers, compared to 5% of the women in the national survey.

A very generalized sketch of the alcohol abuser in the Indian community is: a young man who is chronically unemployed. He lacks job skills, and when he does obtain a job it lacks satisfactions and provides few incentives to continue working.

He resides with relatives or friends, contributing no money to a low income household. He has no concrete plans for bettering his circumstance or defining a more satisfactory personal role. He has little awareness of community resources and is, in fact, quite unskilled in his contacts with the larger community. He spends his leisure time among peers who have similar problems and limitations.

This, of course, is a composite from which many of the respondents differ in important ways. Because heavy drinking is so pervasive, it can be found among all ages, at all the education and income levels among both men and women.

Looking at the character of drinking ... rather than simply at quantity ... what appears to be of considerable importance is the rarity of solitary drinking. The great majority report that they seldom or never drink alone. The single, most often stated reason for drinking is "to be sociable." They drink in groups and they share, which to some extent explains how people who are poor can drink so regularly. If one person has alcohol, it is shared. There is strong pressure to share; there is strong pressure to drink. To refuse to do either with friends and associates amounts to an insult. In fact, over half of the men report prolonged binges which usually "just happened" in the course of being sociable.

Those who view drinking in a positive way most frequently claim that it helps them to socialize and relax. Interestingly, in spite of the heavy drinking or perhaps because of it, about

half of the respondents could think of nothing at all good to say about alcohol. They admit that it causes them much trouble with the law, and negative comments far outnumber positive ones. Still, and this is important to understanding of alcohol use among Indians, there is little evidence of strong censure or open disapproval. Even aggressive, highly deviant behavior appears to be rather passively accepted by individuals as well as by the community at large when it is associated with the use of alcohol. Apparently, disapproval or other overt attempts to control excessive drinking is contrary to the characteristic stance of non-interference. It is important to note that among people who overwhelmingly list alcohol as the number one problem, there is little open disapproval either individually or collectively.

And finally, there is the finding that there are a number of Indians who formerly were heavy drinkers and who at some point abruptly changed their drinking patterns. Further, a significant number claim that it was not particularly difficult to do so even after many years of heavy use. At some time, frequently during the middle years and perhaps in response to family and tribal responsibilities, they simply quit. This cessation of heavy drinking is reported elsewhere in the literature for reservation Indians. No explanation is offered ... though several hypotheses are tenable ... but it probably is the case that, whatever else may be operating,

this ability to quit is related to the highly social character of alcohol use.

The Indians themselves recognize the magnitude of the alcohol problem. Almost unanimously they assert that solutions cannot be imposed from the outside, cannot be built on a white man's model. They may accept help ... some even seek it from professionals in the white community ... but they claim that this Indian problem must be dealt with in Indian ways.

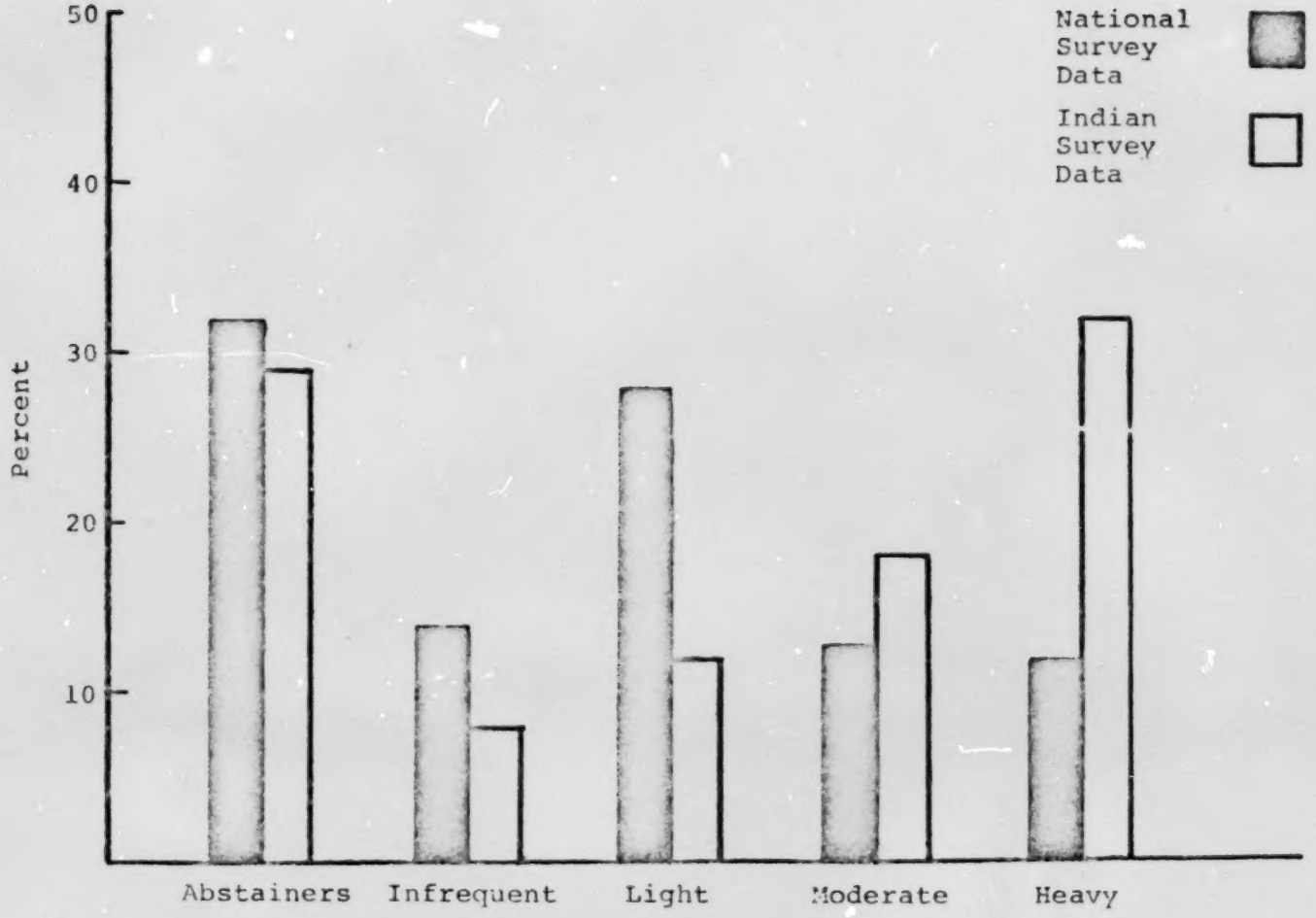

Fig. 3: Percentage of all Respondents in Drinking Categories (O-F-V) For National Survey and Survey of Urban Indians

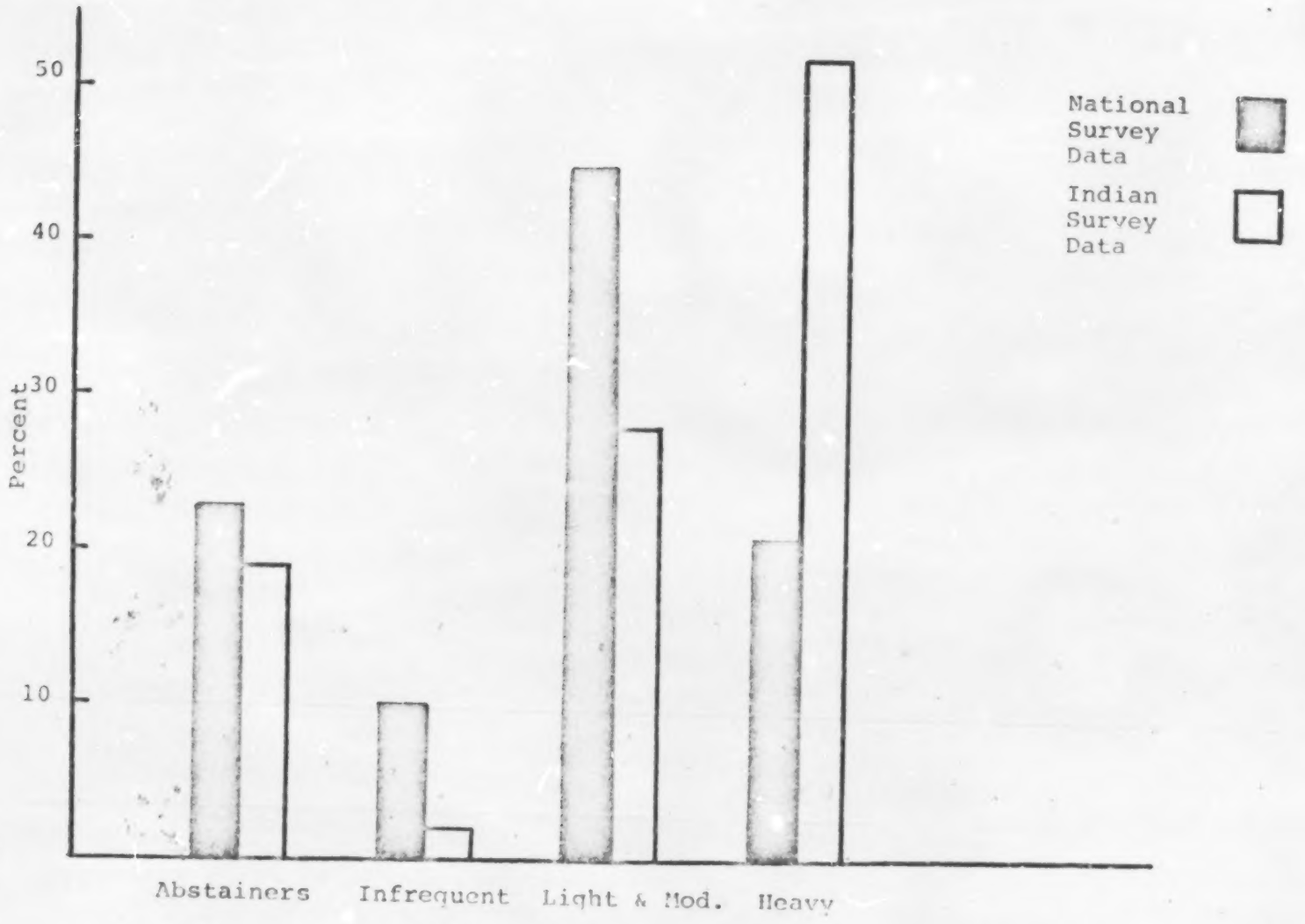

Fig. 4: Percentage of Male Respondents in Drinking Categories (O-F-V) For National Survey and Survey of Urban Indians